

This is a paper presented at the University of Dundee for the Computing Department. Thank you to Professor Annalu Waller and her team for making me so welcome.

Please contact me if you have questions and feel free to quote me but make sure you cite me in your work.

To begin I am going to play a particularly important piece of music to me by Pink, called, Conversations With My 13 Year Old Self, so please sit back and listen.

Conversations with my thirteen year old self
Conversations with my thirteen year old self

You're angry
I know this
The world couldn't care less
You're lonely
I feel this
And you wish you were the best
No teachers
Or guidance
And you always walk alone
You're crying
At night when
Nobody else is home

Come over here and let me hold your hand and hug you darling
I promise you that it won't always feel this bad
There are so many things I want to say to you
You're the girl I used to be
You little heartbroken thirteen year old me


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I hope you heard the words because it was how I felt at mainstream secondary school. It was a miserable experience at the time, especially when I was told not to expect to do well with GCSEs. Now when I look back I can laugh because I know I can achieve in life. I wish I knew then what I know now.

What am I going to talk about?

- Background
- The challenges of being an AAC User
- Preparation to sit Exams and Choice of Boards and Papers
- What help I get
 - In class
 - Revision
 - Exams
- Outcomes
- Recommendations for accessible teaching and learning



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I would like to take you through, briefly, my educational experiences, the challenges I've faced using AAC in school, the exams I've sat, and I'm still sitting. The support I've had to do this and how I've done so far, then some personal recommendations for accessible teaching

and learning. For me this is a personal celebration, if I had listened to some people along the way I wouldn't be sat here now.



Background

- Cerebral Palsy 4 Months
- High Frequency Hearing Impairment 6 Months
- Dysarthria 2.5 Years
- Hearing Impairment Aided from 10 Years
- Dystonic CP diagnosed at 16
- Vision – needed Glasses from 16

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First, my background. I understand I had a difficult start in life although I was a few days late. Right from the start my parents were warned that I might have a disability and following lots and lots of tests and hospital visits I was diagnosed with Athetoid Cerebral Palsy and a High Frequency Loss Hearing Impairment. By 2 and a half, it was clear I had speech challenges. At 10 my hearing got worse but we never found out why, despite lots of tests. Two years ago things changed and I got a new diagnosis of Dystonic CP – I get uncontrolled jerks cause by pain, stress, being over tired or physically exhausted. These have affected my learning at times especially for exams but I manage them with pain relief and by talking to people I trust. I think it's important for you to know I love to talk and my success is partially down to my being able to communicate verbally. But it is pretty difficult to understand me. This short video clip will help you understand why I use a communication device.

(Listen to me VIDEO – there is a link to this on my website)

I'd never heard myself speak before I made this video and it shocked me. How I sound is not how I hear myself in my head. It has really made me understand how important having a speech device is. People who know me well can manage but I often have to give them clues and use my lightwriter as a prompt.

Primary school

- Mainstream primary
- KS1 SATs
- KS2 SATs




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My Education started like all other children. I went to playgroup with a one to one, then to the Village Primary School. I did my SAT's like everyone else. The big difference was the many professionals who came into school to give specialist advice on teaching and learning. My Annual Reviews were in the school hall as the 18 people present couldn't get into the office or the staff room.

Use of IT and AAC

- PC in class from age 4
- Dynavox from 4
- Laptop from 7 (Juniors)
- Tellus from 9
- Lightwriter from 10



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Another big difference to the rest of my class was the use of AAC and IT which changed as my literacy skills developed. I started with a dynavox at 4 which was bigger than me before gradually getting smaller and smaller devices over the years. In fact my i-phone is now brilliant for 1-1 communication, quick notes and photos. The funny thing was that in the infant school none of the teachers used computer, shortly after two of the three them taught me in turn they retired early. Was it me or the thought of working with technology all the time that made this happen?

Neuropsychological assessments

- Neuropsychological assessments aged 6 and 10
- Need access to mainstream and GCSE curriculum
- Need 1-1 Support
- Need work to be accessible
- Will need extra consideration for exams
- A Special School Placement was recommended



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[7]

When I was doing Key Stage 1 SAT's and again for Key Stage 2, I went for Neuropsychological Assessments which showed I was developing normally and needed to be doing the same as everyone else. What was different was needing to make the work accessible, having a reader for my own work so I could lip read tenses to know it was right, extra time etc. At 10 it was suggested I needed a special school placement which could provide access to a mainstream curriculum. BUT I am stubborn.

Mainstream secondary



- MY Choice
- Year 7 and part Year 8
- Only pupil in school with chair and AAC

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Going to a specialist school meant going away from home and I didn't want to board, I just wanted to stay with my friends. So it was my choice to go to the local girl's school. It started well but didn't work out over time.

Mainstream secondary (cont...)



- Team of teaching assistants to support learning and preparation of work
- Withdrawal of support 'to make me independent' by TA's
- Emphasis on typing and quantity of work – keeping up
- Questions if homework was my own work

They kept thinking that if I could do something with help I was cured. This meant they kept taking away all my help. It wasn't fair and they were only interested in my typing speeds. Also they didn't like my homework as they didn't think I did it. I did, but Mum knew how to support me and we worked effectively together in the same way I do now at Valence. Some of the teachers seemed to think my lightwriter was a toy. One teacher borrowed it every lesson to have a play and pretend to speak like me. I guess I should have felt honoured.

Year 8 – school concerns

- Not making progress working independently
- Teaching Assistants would find it difficult to support KS3 Sats and GCSEs
- Probably wouldn't do GCSEs as would be 'lucky' to pass any
- Need to consider dropping subjects



The mainstream school said I wasn't making progress in working alone. I guess, looking back now, I think they didn't understand. I will always need to direct people to help me. My Educational Psychologist challenged the staff. He asked if I could successfully use a ramp to get up a couple of steps in my chair would they take it away when I was doing well. They began to worry they couldn't support me to do my Key Stage 3 SAT's or GCSE's, in fact they

didn't want to support me at all. They wanted me to drop all practical subjects like DT, some Science, Art and PE. I refused although I didn't do French. By Christmas in Year 8 it was clear to me and my family that they were unable to support me.



I was off sick a lot. Mainly from the stress and being fed up that the work wasn't made accessible. It was hard work always feeling different. After a big fight, supported by my educational psychologist, my social worker and my AAC consultant, education finally agreed things were not working out. We think they didn't want to admit failure because they were a very successful school. I eventually left the mainstream school in February. After 7 weeks, out of school, I got into Valence, thankfully.

Move to valence – end y8

- Access to full mainstream curriculum including
 - DT (Resistant Materials)
 - French
 - Food Tech
- AAC Team at Valence
- Understood my learning needs
- Y9 sat KS3 SATS



How refreshing! I loved Valence from the word go. Suddenly I could access the subjects mainstream couldn't offer me like DT and food technology. Everyone seemed to understand what I needed and I was happier than ever before at any school. Although I have had some ups and downs due to my health whilst I have been there.

Personalised learning

- My timetable is mine alone
- Y10 began some GCSEs to finish in Y11, 12 or 13
- Y11 and Y12 began more GCSEs to finish in Y13
- Most subjects over 3 years
- Lots of chances to practice including 'in real life'

8:00 - 9:00	9:00 - 10:00	10:00 - 11:00	11:00 - 11:30	11:30 - 12:15	12:15 - 1:00	1:00 - 2:00	2:00 - 3:00
Y10	Assembly	English	Supervised Study	ICT	DT	DT	DT
Y11	Assembly	English	Supervised Study	ICT	Science	Science	Science
Y12	Assembly	English	Supervised Study	ICT	Supervised Study	Supervised Study	Supervised Study
Y13	Assembly	PE	English	Supervised Study	Humanities	Humanities	Humanities
Y14	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly	ICT	Supervised Study	Supervised Study	Supervised Study


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Valence offers a personalised curriculum for every individual student. It is great. So GCSE's are over two, three, or four years. For example science started in 2008 and is done over three years with two modules each year. I have just completed this. This year I have 7 sessions of supervised 1 to 1 study so I can develop my own interests.

The challenges of using AAC

- Time to respond in class
- Being talked over
- Learning to interrupt and ask questions



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Using AAC can be a challenge, not just for me as the user, but, also for the other students and staff. Others have to learn to wait. Yes, it can be frustrating to be talked over. But even

people who speak get talked over sometimes by others. I had to learn to be assertive and patient. We worked on strategies for me to interrupt and ask questions as I am the only AAC user in my class, but I still find it hard in bigger groups.

Hearing Challenges and AAC

- Access to vocabulary
 - On Device
 - 1-1 Sessions
- See the written word
- Hear the word
- Lip read the word
- Hear it on device
- Use it in context



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Access to the huge vocabulary needed for GCSEs is essential. My teacher for the hearing impaired gave school guidance on how to make this work. I got a 1 to 1 session every week to hear new vocabulary in context. This includes seeing the written word, programming it in my device, then hearing and seeing it said in context. If this happens I don't get thrown in a lesson and this really helps. A deaf friend of mine at a different school uses a symbol based AAC system and her school did not take the modular exams with multiple choice options. As she was not allowed to use pre-programmed phrases or words she could not use appropriate words to explain scientific terminology. This was a shame as she could do the work.

Additional challenges for me

- Speed of speech (natural and AAC)
- Ability to physically write
- Use of IT independently and quickly
- Hearing impairment and lip reading
- Note taking
- Practical work in class or for homework



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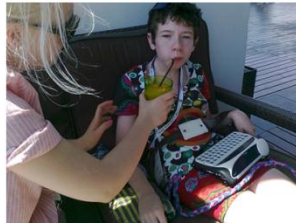
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I love to talk but it isn't very clear. My speech is very slow and tiring, but using AAC is also slow. I can write, but again it's difficult to read, slow and tiring. Using IT helps but is still physically tiring. My hearing impairment means that I lip read so it's impossible to make

notes and listen. All this means I need one to one help, especially for scribing and practical work where I need to direct someone to do what I cannot.

Personal Assistant

- Helpful and reliable
- Good listener
- Understanding of individual needs
- Knows when to stand back
- Do as directed even if thinks its wrong



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(19)

I think a personal assistant has to be helpful and reliable, they have to understand you and in my case be a great listener. Having someone different regularly doesn't help. To help with learning they have to know when to stand back but more importantly also to do something as directed even if they know it's not right or needed.

Revision

- Weeks and weeks of Revision
- No notes just practice papers
- DVD's, CD's and Audio
- Practical Activities




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(17)

Revision has been a big challenge. I cannot make notes or underline key words. It takes hours to make a mind map so I have listened to DVD's, CD's and podcasts. I've done practice papers and practical activities at home to visualise activities in science like boiling

the kettle or using food colouring to learn about chromatography. I need someone to page turn, put on a DVD, read some notes, make some notes and just generally assist as I direct.

Revision (cont...)



- Education would not fund
- Social Services would not fund
- All Revision with Mum or my PA's using Direct Payments for Social Activities
- Took a lot longer than I planned


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(18)

Revision has taken much longer than I planned. I worked every day each holiday and most weekends. Sadly neither, education or social services have felt funding for revising was important. So revision has been mostly at home with mum or using my direct payment money with a P.A. rather than going out. BORING!

Consideration to sit exams

- Looking at classroom support
- Working out how long it takes to do a piece of work



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Valence School have years of experience of picking the right boards and papers for students. They know it's important for us to have the same support in exams as we do in class.

Consideration to sit exams/choice of exam boards and papers

- Looking at classroom support
- Working out how long it takes to do a piece of work
- High course work content
- Exams in modules over several sittings
- Foundation level papers with less writing

AQA

OCR
RECOGNISING ACHIEVEMENT

WJEC
CBAC

My GCSE's have had a high coursework content to reduce the importance of the exam. Mostly we do foundation level papers as there is less writing. The disadvantage of this is the maximum grade is a C but Taking modules means we can pace ourselves with the work. The proposed changes to exams in England will make an enormous difference which I will come to shortly.

Valence classes

- Mixed age groups by ability eg GCSEs
- Small classes – 3 to 10 students
- Lots of 1-1 eg Maths
- Courses over 3 years to allow all ages to access materials
- Staggered start on subjects to give longer learning time

I have been with the same class now for four years, we are put together by the level of work we do. Each year some leave and others join. As my timetable is individual there can be just me, three of us doing a subject or the whole group. This means lots of one to one

teaching as we can all be at different stages. Also there is always the chance to recap as the topic is done again by younger students, this has really helped me. The start and finish times of courses are staggered so we can pace ourselves.

Personal computer profile

- Personalised programmes/software
- Accessibility options preset
- Access to social networking
 - Skype
 - Facebook
- i-Cloud or similar syncing


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[25]

IT is ever more essential. At school we each have a personalised log in with our own software and pre set accessibility options. Besides the academic stuff we also have access to social networking which means we can talk to each other outside of class. I would love to be able to sync everything I do at home and school like I can on my iPhone and iPad but maybe that will come next. It would definitely help with revision for exams.

Entitled help

- At least 100% Extra Time
- Fatigue Breaks when Needed
- Scribe to Type or write
- Reader except in English Language
- Large Print Papers
- Room on Own

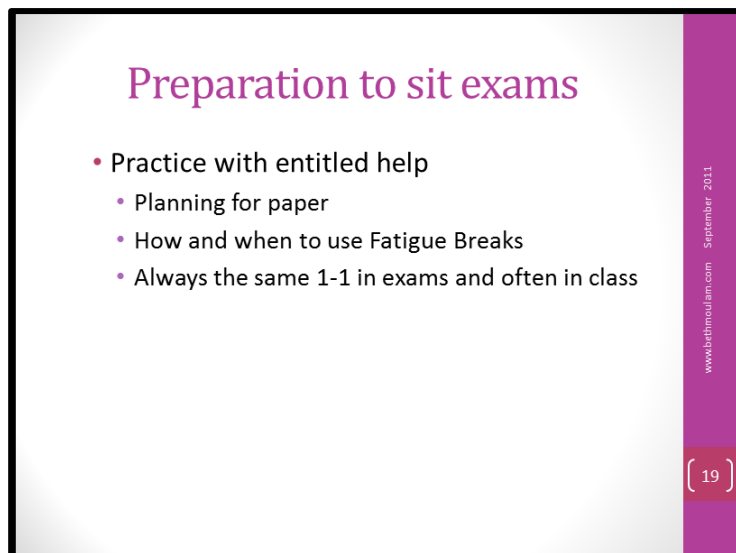


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[18]

For exams I get at least one hundred percent extra time, the exam officer applies to the exam board for this and is given permission. I get breaks when I ask. The breaks are still

under exam conditions so that includes meal times if necessary. My one to one types what I say which is a mix of my voice, my AAC and me taking over the keyboard if necessary. I get a reader, except in English, both for speed and because I need to lipread. The large print paper's means I can focus just on the words and not on diagrams or tables. It also means I get a room on my own, but then so does every Valence student sitting an exam.



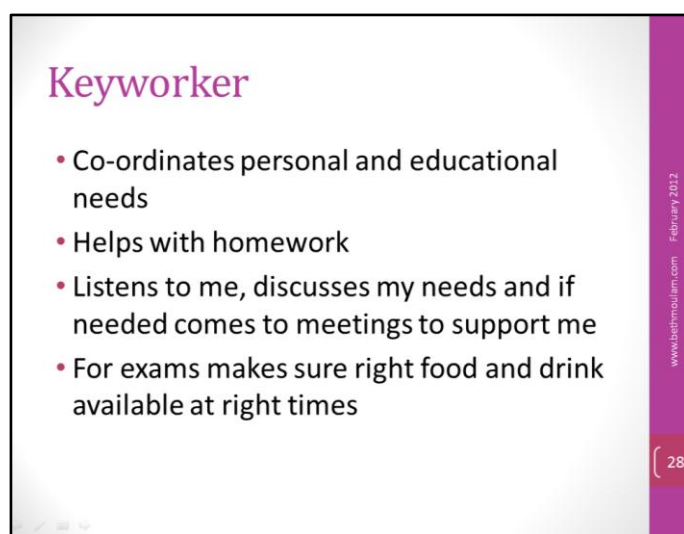
Preparation to sit exams

- Practice with entitled help
 - Planning for paper
 - How and when to use Fatigue Breaks
 - Always the same 1-1 in exams and often in class

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(19)

I spend time doing practice papers at home and school. These are the actual past papers downloaded from the exam board website. The supervised rest breaks are essential. In English literature the 2 and a half hour exam takes about 7 hours. That's 5 hours plus breaks to go to the loo, have a drink and eat, have a stretch etc. After a marathon like this I usually fall asleep straight after the exam in the boarding house. On exam days I have to conserve my energy and get fed all my meals and help to do everything I normally do independently.



Keyworker


- Co-ordinates personal and educational needs
- Helps with homework
- Listens to me, discusses my needs and if needed comes to meetings to support me
- For exams makes sure right food and drink available at right times

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The input of my keyworker is important as she works across school and the residential side of school. She coordinates what I need daily for personal care and educational support. For

exams she works with the exam officer to ensure I get the right food and drink at the right times, for me that is especially important as I find hot food is easiest to digest. Her job is also to listen to me, to discuss my needs and if I want her to she will come to a meeting in school with teachers or the health team to support me. Anyway does it all work?



Science

Reasons

- Modular
- Learn, sit paper and move on
- On screen multiple choice exam
- 30 minutes – with extra time 60 minutes


Outcomes

6 Science Modules	Results	Overall
Biology 1	C	D
Chemistry 1	C	
Physics 1	C	
Biology 2	C	
Chemistry 2	D	
Physics 2	C	
Coursework	G	


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As I said the science exam was modular. I have done some re sits when I didn't get a C grade but overall was very pleased until I got the final result, without the practical I would have had a C so I'm disappointed with the D grade. I am re sitting the practical I S A but this is the hardest part to direct someone else to do a practical and then answer questions on something you didn't actually do yourself just watched.



Humanities



Reasons

- 3 separate exams
- Short 30 minute papers – 60 minutes with extra time
- Able to sit over 2/3 years
- Written answers but quite short
- To resit RE as predicted B/C but ran out of time

Outcomes

Subject	Results
RE	D
History	Working Towards
Geography	Working Towards


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Humanities is work in progress. I hope to resit the RE as I did very little revision because I ran out of time at home revising with all my other exams and I was predicted to do better.

But I still have geography and history to do this summer and so will pull up my grade that way.

English



Reasons

- Coursework and exams
- Ran out of time in both
- English Language
 - 2 x 2 hour papers = 4 hours for me plus breaks
 - 1 chance to resit in November
- English Literature
 - 2.5 hour paper = 5 hours plus breaks – took all day
 - Cannot resit due syllabus change

Outcomes


Subject	Results
English Language	D
English Literature	D

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English Language and Literature was pleasing but not what I wanted. I am unable to re sit as the syllabus has changed so will take the new exams next year. Learning the literature was challenging but I enjoyed it. I went to see the play an inspector calls twice. I had DVDs and audio guides which I listened to in the car, I had films, the printed play and study guides but best of all I had an inspiring teacher – Miss Brown.

DT



Reasons

- High level coursework
- Multiple choice exam

Outcomes

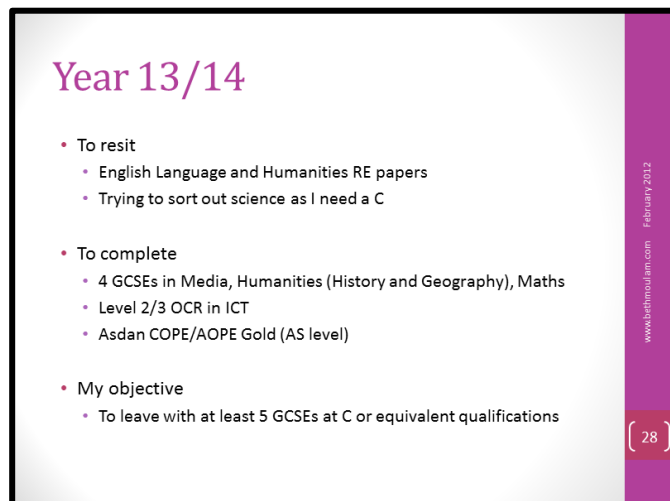
Results
C

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(23)

DT was a challenge to say the least! I made a wooden box with 28 Dovetail Joints and lots of glue. It was designed to go on the back of my wheelchair and swing to the side so I could get things out on my own. Mr Cooper, the DT teacher, said with so much glue and all the joints if I crashed and both my chair and I were smashed the box would still bounce down the road in one piece. With a bit of adaptation it is now used at home for Magazines. The

teacher asked me to consider A level but I was pleased when it was over as I found the directing very tiring.



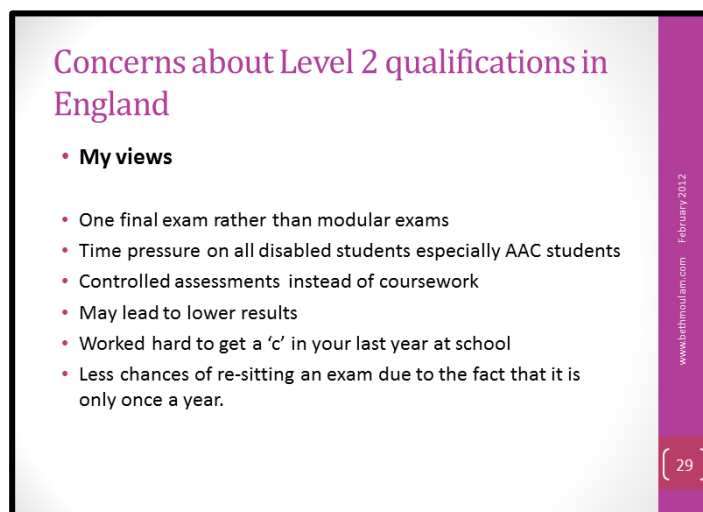
Year 13/14

- To resit
 - English Language and Humanities RE papers
 - Trying to sort out science as I need a C
- To complete
 - 4 GCSEs in Media, Humanities (History and Geography), Maths
 - Level 2/3 OCR in ICT
 - Asdan COPE/AOPE Gold (AS level)
- My objective
 - To leave with at least 5 GCSEs at C or equivalent qualifications

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(28)

So, the plan for this year. I hope to Re sit, Complete and be ready to leave Valence with 5 C Grades or equivalent. That's if everything goes to plan. I didn't mention I am doing an OCR in IT. Its 100% course work and I'm hoping to get a level 3 qualification by the time I leave, but will definitely get the level 2 which is at least a C grade. I am also doing the ASDAN certificate of personal effectiveness Gold award. It is a level 3 course equivalent to an A S level and focuses on things like citizenship, global awareness and career planning. So fingers crossed to ticking all the boxes I need for my college course.



Concerns about Level 2 qualifications in England

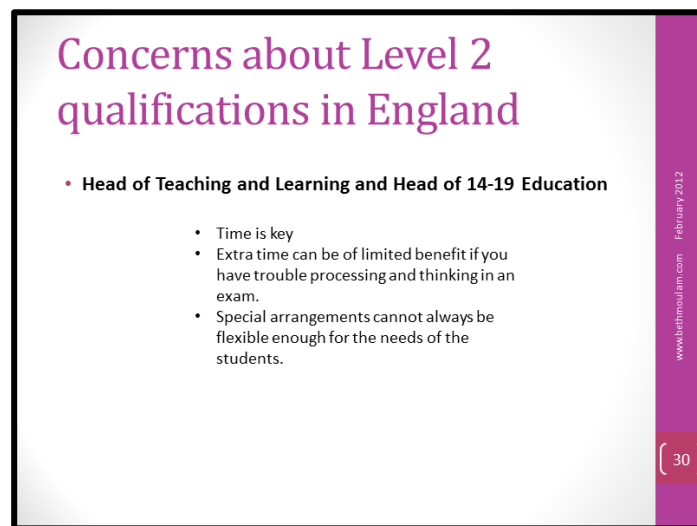
- **My views**
 - One final exam rather than modular exams
 - Time pressure on all disabled students especially AAC students
 - Controlled assessments instead of coursework
 - May lead to lower results
 - Worked hard to get a 'c' in your last year at school
 - Less chances of re-sitting an exam due to the fact that it is only once a year.

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I believe the planned changes to GCSE exams in England will make them tougher for all students. For those with additional needs like me there will be the pressure of one final exam rather than bite sized chunks. When controlled assessments are allowed they will be over a much shorter time than course work and happen around the same time as exams.

This means possibly taking fewer subjects to deal with the increased workload as it will be impossible to do everything in the few days/weeks in June with the extra time needed for everything. An example of what might happen can be seen when you hear about another friend of mine who did A level Geography. He had to do each paper over 2 days with the extra time rather than one half day of 3 hours. This meant two very long days for two consecutive days. The result was complete exhaustion, again is this a test of physical stamina or cognition? Final exams are a definite disadvantage for those of us using AAC.



Concerns about Level 2 qualifications in England

- Head of Teaching and Learning and Head of 14-19 Education
 - Time is key
 - Extra time can be of limited benefit if you have trouble processing and thinking in an exam.
 - Special arrangements cannot always be flexible enough for the needs of the students.

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The exam boards give extra time for some student but at Valence but not everyone can benefit from more thinking time. Even though there are national special arrangements for disabled students these are being tested to the limit all the time by the government with new planned changes. I saw my MP last week about the welfare benefit changes but we also talked about education changes. He is to go and talk to the education secretary as he now knows the difficulties students like me will face are an unintended bi-product of the new system of exams. In addition our discussion led to him recognising a need for him to find out how disabled students like me will pay back student loans and tuition fees if we can only work part time. Let's hope something happens as dyslexic students will also face disadvantage as 5 per cent of exam marks will now be awarded for spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Career Plans

- I need 5 C grades or equivalent including Science and English Language
- To do a Health and Social Care Level 3 Diploma
- Go on to University to train as an OT in AAC and assistive technology

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(25)

I still dream of being a OT and the 5 C's are my stepping stones to a level 3 course in Health and Social Care, before University. I know that some people are a bit sceptical about me being able to do it with my communication but I am determined to give it a go.



When I get to Uni some of the things high on my list of must haves will be a course that uses I T effectively for podcasts, course materials, on-line learning and tutor groups. This will mean I can work and revise at my own pace. My i-phone and i-pad have surprisingly changed the way I work for notes and doing presentations and my kindle for revision. Another thing that is essential is a text reader.

My recommendations

- Believe in yourself and aim high
- School must believe in you
- Learning is life long, it doesn't matter if it takes longer
- Revise a way that suits you (me - by doing past papers)
- Do subjects you enjoy
- Look at what's needed for future courses
- Don't try and do too much
- School and home **MUST** work together




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I guess if I was giving my 13 year old self some recommendations and moral support I would say. "you can achieve your dreams". But you need to be in the right place and have people who understand AAC to support you. Learning is lifelong so time doesn't matter if it takes longer. Find strategies to revise that suit you, choose subjects which will get you there over time. Finally find a school or university that wants to work with you and the professionals who know what you need.

Support required



- Supportive Tutors
- I T
- Assessment
- Pace of learning
- Positive attitude

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If I was making recommendations to a University offering a place to someone like me I would be looking at the tutor support, 1 to 1 support, the I T support, the assessment methods, and ensuring the pace of learning can be tailored to the student. But I would particularly want them to really understand the needs of the individual because if you skim over the needs, and don't address them head on, you will run the risk of the student failing to achieve the grades.

Support required (2)

- Don't be afraid of taking specialist advice
- Listen to student (and family)
- Talk about concerns
- Find role models
- Be open minded



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I think it's important not to be afraid of taking specialist advice, to listen to the student and those who know them well. To seek out role models who have experienced similar learning environments but most of all to be open minded.

Celebrate your achievements



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If we can get all this right then we will be able to celebrate our joint achievements. Success comes to all those who work hard and keep at it.

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